

Space Travel

PDC

Progress report on
SPACE MEDICINE

*Complete Interstellar
Novel*

THE GODMEN

By Edmond Hamilton

NOVEMBER

1958

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William L. Hamling
WILLIAM L. HAMLING • EDITOR

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Space Travel

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FACT & FICTION

THE GODMEN

8

Interplanetary science fiction novel by Edmond Hamilton

★ SPACE MEDICINE

58

Special Science Progress Report by Henry Bott, Research Engineer

HIS FIRST DAY AT WAR

68

Science fiction short story by Harlan Ellison

CAPTAIN'S CHOICE

78

Science fiction short story by Tom W. Harris

NINE SHADOWS AT DOOMSDAY

90

Science fiction short story by S. M. Tenneshaw

GATEWAY TO TERROR

104

Science fiction short story by Robert Silverberg

THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT DIE

118

Science fiction short story by Darius John Granger

FEATURES

THE EDITORIAL 4

JET TRANSPORT 88

GYROSCOPIC REFERENCE 116

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Nine Shadows At Doomsday

by

S. M. Jenneshaw

Centuries before something had destroyed life in the solar system. That portion of space was now off limits — but not for a hunted man . . .

HIS NAME was Mark Chan. He was a tall rough-jawed vaguely almond-eyed man, a thief and a hunted criminal. Son of an Anglo-Polynesian mother and an Alphan father, born in the inhospitable half-world between two recognized stratas of society, he had drifted into crime and become so expert that half the law forces in the Alphan system did not believe he existed and the other half drove itself frantic trying to locate him so that he could be sentenced to social reconditioning. His last job had been a big one, and the legal heat had grown intense. That was the only reason he'd tackled this offer—because it enabled him to get so far away that no one could find him for awhile. Now, expertly handling the controls of the D-Class Explorer rocket he wondered whether reconditioning would have been half bad . . .

It was a stellar boneyard, this nine-planet system through which the battered explorer shot. A million-mile cemetery hung with stars. He hated to admit it but he was beginning to feel the same terror the others had expressed. Here was nothing but silence. Silence and death. And they had to *land* on one of these empty spinning rocks.

"Watch it!" came the voice of Dr. Wilton Wallace. "The red signal is on!"

Chan turned. Wallace, seated in the bucket next to Chan's, was a slender dryly academic young man with glasses. One of his thin fingers was pointed to a scarlet blinker on the control board. The other occupant of the control cabin, an attractive brunette with severely straight hair and no make-up on her lips, reached for the head plug.

D. BRUCE BERRY



"Who is it, June?" Wallace asked. "The Foundation?"

"Just a minute," Dr. June Simmonds answered. "The code signal's weak . . ."

Chan eyed her obliquely. She was intensely good-looking, though she worked hard to conceal the fact as did most females associated with scholarly institutions these days. So far on the trip he had been unable to break her reserve, unable even to get her to smile once. This irritated him because he had always been more than successful with women. She noticed him scowling at her, turned away coolly and stared out through the thick view plate at the misty red planet toward which the ship was sweeping.

"Yes, it's the Foundation code, right enough," she said at last, hanging up the plug. "On the alarm frequency. That means trouble, Will."

Wallace's face was cut with a frown. "What could have happened? We took so many precautions! And if the law has somehow discovered that we've come into this system illegally there'll be enforcement ships after us in no time. We'll never get a chance to take a look inside Thor Peak . . ."

Wallace gave a weary, dejected sigh.

"I don't understand the private

code you have rigged up with that museum of yours," Chan said a bit sharply, "but whatever the message, you won't receive it until we've jetted down on the planet there. I've set the pilot tapes for your exact reference points and we'll be sitting at the foot of your Thor Peak in precisely one hour and ten minutes. Because of the message warp lag you'll be lucky to get the actual decoded transmission for an hour and a half. So at least you'll have twenty glorious moments in which to advance science."

Dr. June Simmonds retorted: "Your manner has become increasingly more offensive on each day of the trip, Chan. You're being paid handsomely to pilot for us, in addition to the fact that you needed to get out of the Alphanus system *much* more than we did."

A cynical smile touched Chan's features. "Sure, oh sure. But I didn't bargain for a trip into the bottom of a grave. There's nothing alive out there for more miles than I can count. Why not admit it? You need me and I need you, so why not bare our little neuroses and be friends? You keep yours hidden pretty well, Dr. Simmonds. What is it? Frustration or just plain arrogance?"

JUNE SIMMONDS flushed, stifled a retort and bit her lip.

Suddenly Wallace grunted softly, for he had been staring through the view plate at the swelling red ball of the planet which was their destination and as through hypnotized by the sight he had evidently paid no attention to their conversation. Wallace spoke:

"I understand how you feel, Chan. It affects me the same way. The Sol system has been dead for three thousand years. We're perhaps the first humans to penetrate it since the cataclysm—whatever it was—swept out from Thor Peak down there on Mars. We wouldn't even be here today I suppose, if those few thousand ships hadn't gotten off the outer moons while the inner planets were going through the agonies of death. What was it like, I wonder? What'll we find there, if anything?" He smiled wanly. "I seem to be running to cliches, so here's another. We haven't yet beaten Nature. The Sol system lived thousands of years—and was wiped out in one day. And we don't know why."

"But perhaps we'll find out!" June Simmonds breathed suddenly. "That's the whole reason for—"

Chan interrupted: "For risking imprisonment, maybe even reconditioning, plus sure abolition of your beloved Alphanus Historical Foundation, all because you couldn't resist poking around in a

system that has been off limits since our ancestors were sucklings. You people are almost as dedicated about breaking the law as I am."

"I'm sorry Dr. Greentree couldn't see this," Wallace said.

"That's *another* thing," Chan replied. "I'm not used to having a corpse in the zero compartment when I pilot a ship. That man shouldn't have come if he knew his heart was weak. The first serious grav field snapped him like a toothpick." Chan shook his head to indicate that he did not understand the ways of intellectuals. "Who was he, anyhow?"

Wallace explained that the dead passenger, one Dr. Amos Greentree, was an histoarchaeologist who had presented himself at the Alphanus Historical Foundation one day with a staggering sum of money—just the sum needed by Doctors Wallace and Simmonds to finish the last location charts of Thor Peak. The source of the natural cataclysm which had stripped the Sol system of its life had been the subject of a lifetime search by the fathers of the two scientists. At last the key to the old writings had been broken, just before the two researchers died. Since the whole project was highly illegal, considering that no one knew what peril still lurked in the Sol system and that exploration was con-

centrated on moving outward, beyond the Alphanus system, rather, than inward, there had been no funds to complete the details of the work.

Then the little man, Dr. Greentree, had appeared, unknown to any of the staff of the Foundation but with valid credentials which withstood a rigorous checking. He had been working independently on the problem of Sol's destruction, and though he had accumulated considerable money—how, he declined to say—he had concluded that one man just couldn't complete the task alone. So he had volunteered to join forces with the large institution, and he had been a passenger on this completely illegal return trip to the source of one of the holocausts which had plagued man at regular intervals through recorded history.

"Isn't even decent," Chan muttered. "Not giving him a burial."

"I must say you're hardly in a position to talk of morals, Chan," June Simmonds snapped.

Chan scowled. "Lady, I'm losing my patience . . ."

"Stop that, both of you!" Wallace broke in. "We may have enough trouble on our hands when the message comes through from the Foundation. If we're at one another's throats every moment, we'll defeat our whole purpose—

which is to gain time to get inside Thor Peak. Now. Chan, you say the tapes are set? They should be locked in for the west slope of the peak."

"They are," Chan grumbled. "You said the records showed an entrance there."

"How about the bore charge?"

"Ready, and targeted in. We'll let her go from one mile. It should leave a straight, clean opening right down to the center of the peak."

Wallace stared out through the view plate. The red and gnarly face of Mars filled the entire screen now, bulking huge like a vast scarlet curtain folded many times. Chan checked one of his gauges, whistled sharply and set about manipulating levers. The whine and roar of the Explorer's tubes modulated, and the descent rate indicators readjusted sharply. All of a sudden the surface of the red world seemed to be rushing up at them, and it continued to do so for several minutes. Chan worked the controls expertly. There were tight cords of muscle standing out in his neck now, because the combination of a ticklish job and the total dead emptiness of the shining land below the ship worked ruthlessly on his nerves.

"Get on the magnascope if you want," he announced suddenly.

"Center it on thirty-eight four plus nine and you'll have Thor Peak." He gave a short grunt of effort, pulled a blazing green lever sharply. "There goes the bore charge . . ."

ON THE CRYSTAL panel along one side of the compartment a magnified view of the terrain below slowly blurred into focus. Thor Peak, tallest crag of an artificially created mountain chain blasted on to the face of Mars when man first colonized it, towered up in a swirling reddish twilight. Abruptly, in the side of the peak, there was a thin whirling column of smoke. When it diminished a reddish-black circular opening could be seen on the side of the mountain. Wallace and June Simmonds watched the screen with something close to religious fervor, while Chan savagely manipulated the ship's controls in the last, most difficult stages of descent.

"Hurry!" Wallace breathed involuntarily. "Hurry! If they're after us from Alphanus, when the message comes, we'll have to jet off . . . hide . . ."

"Hide where?" Chan growled. "They'll send enough dread noughts to catch fifty ships like this one. And I've got a feeling that's exactly what's going to happen. *All right, strap in. Be quick about it!*

We're going down."

Through the shifting sand-blown red sky the Explorer plunged. Mechanical psychoblockout equipment blanked the screens to prevent mild cases of the Landing Syndrome. At last there was a muffled scrunching sound, and though none of them felt a jar, they knew the Explorer had settled. Wallace and Dr. Simmonds scrambled for the companionway, donning air sets as a precautionary measure. No telling what the cataclysm had done to the atmosphere. Chan studied the spectro-checkers. Everything seemed all right. Still . . . He shivered and moved after them, having attached the message plug to his belt for instant reception of the danger signal when it came.

As he passed the zero compartment he suddenly remembered little innocuous Dr. Amos Greentree lying there inside in a bath of cataleptic fluid. Again the shiver passed down Chan's spine. He snagged a heatgun from the locker along with his own air set. Wallace was already manipulating the lock wheels, and in a second more they were outside, in the silica dust up to their knees. The reddish haze of twilight hung over the endless miles of dead, windblown desert on one hand, dripped down over the faultlessly wild and magnificent man-

made crags on the other. Perhaps a quarter of a mile up the slope of the tallest conical peak, a blackish crater ten yards across gaped wide.

Wallace was already moving swiftly along, crashing through the dust in his eagerness to penetrate the center of Thor Peak. There, so the scientists believed, the nature of the cataclysm might be apparent. Dr. June Simmonds carried along a small, compact gray metal case which contained a multi-unit analysis device which could readily isolate the chemical or structural residues left within the mountain by whatever natural force had produced the destruction. Chan had heard them express the belief that the cataclysm was probably produced by a combination of sonic vibrations and cosmic rays which, through wild chance, had been re-focused and diffused through what they called the prismatic quartz interstices of the peak. It was pretty much Greek to him anyway. At the moment all he cared about—suddenly and inexplicably—was that the gray case in June Simmonds' hand looked exceedingly heavy. He wanted to catch up to her, God alone knew why.

Chan snatched the bulky handle of the instrument case. June Simmonds turned sharply, refusing to relinquish her grip, her gray eyes snapping with anger. "Hands off,

Chan! There's no need to play gallant at this stage of . . . oh!"

He had wrenched the case away, and he glowered at her now, mockingly. She massaged her wrist with her other hand. Her scowl darkened. They trudged along, following Wallace's footsteps up the slope through the silica dust. "My question still stands, Doctor," Chan mocked. "Do you get a bang out of the haughty pose, or does it come from the glands?"

For the first time during the entire trip she responded with a sign of emotion. A faint reddish flush rose along her throat from the collar of her tunic.

"You're completely wrong," she began. "What utter nonsense . . ."

"I wonder. I may be a pretty physical type, *Doctor*, but I can see into people fairly well. Why not be honest?" Chan grinned crookedly. "Wallace is plenty far ahead. He can't hear."

SOMETHING TOUCHED her, there—perhaps Chan's sensing that the presence of another calm and academic mind restricted her speech. And since, in all probability, she'd never been *out* of the company of academic minds, her reserve was even more natural. Averting her eyes for a moment, but still with a note of disdain, she said: "You *are* physical, Chan. You

have all the characteristics which my father taught me to know ninety-nine percent of all men possess. I worshipped my father, you see—his mind, his talent, his dedication to knowledge. I've learned the lesson well. Now and again—I'll be truthful—I wonder if he wasn't wrong." The barrier rose again, and her coolness deepened: "Then I run up against a man like you and I become convinced he was right."

They had neared the edge of the bomb-bored tunnel which led down into the center of the peak. Wallace was on his knees at the lip of the crater. Putting the final adjustments on a maximum power thermotorch, one of the hand models. Chan hated himself suddenly for exposing his feelings for June Simmonds. *Feelings?* That was a laugh. Here in this red-lighted boneyard, for the first time in years, he'd thought of himself as having feelings. Queer . . .

"I'm ready," Wallace called, springing to his feet and thumbing the thermotorch control. A wide white swath of brilliance cut down the tunnel, the motes of light automatically analyzing each material the beam touched. Wallace could hardly control his eagerness as they started down the mouth of the opening. Chan asked as they tramped along: "How did this—

this ray or whatever it was—escape from the mountain in the first place?"

"Years ago, so the records read," Wallace explained, "Thor Peak was honeycombed with tunnels. It was, of all things, a spelunking resort back in the days when people lived on Mars. All those tunnels are choked with silica now, but when the cataclysm struck the rays swept straight out to the sky, to the ends of the system."

"Sweet old Mother Nature," Chan said cynically. "She . . . wait!"

There was a signal beeping insistently from the message plug at his belt. He handed the plug to June Simmonds, who screwed it into the jack on her air set. Wallace breathed hard in the white-lit darkness, and Chan saw the girl's face drain till it matched the color of the beam. Her eyes met those of Wallace, panic-filled. Moments passed, and then the small pilot light on the plug pulsed one last time and blacked out.

"What's wrong?" Wallace cried. "Are they after us?"

June Simmonds nodded. "A double strength law fleet. The man who fitted our ship evidently had a pang of conscience. Reported us. But that's not all. There's another ship on our trail. And do you know who the Foundation thinks is in

it? Brill!"

"*Brill!*" Chan exclaimed. "The hatchet man for the Elite Party? I thought he was dead."

"I thought so too," June replied.

"Why in the devil would he follow us?" Wallace demanded. "Of what earthly use could we be in bringing the goose-steppers in his political party back in power again?"

Chan said, "Beyond me, friends. I'd suggest we go back to the Explorer, but fast."

"No," Wallace shook his head. "We'll go on."

"But we'll be caught! . . ." Chan shouted.

"Perhaps not," June Simmonds replied. "In any case, we've come this far and we won't go back. You're outvoted, Chan. And you won't leave us behind, will you? I don't think you're that depraved. Yet." She stepped past Wallace, and Chan said:

"Damn you!"

But he followed them, on down the straight, cleanly-blasted tunnel. For fifteen minutes they descended toward the heart of Thor Peak. Now and then the torch picked out tunnel mouths and branches clogged with silica dust. The bore charge had been accurately placed, for clearly they were following a natural route

downward into the earth toward some central point at the center of the mountain. All the branches led in that direction.

Wallace raced at the head of the group. They were below the surface of Mars now, for the tunnel walls seeped a pungent gray ichor which shone in the beam of the thermotorch. At last Wallace cried: "The tunnel is widening!" Chan caught June Simmonds' arm and they raced in pursuit. Abruptly the walls and ceiling of the tunnel vanished, and their voices coming through the air set-phones took on a hollow quality. Wallace flashed the torch along the walls, caught something dark in the periphery of the glow, passed on, then jerked the beam back. "Shield your eyes for a second," he called. "I'm stepping up the power."

Without warning the vast cavern was illuminated. When the first blinding flash had died, they all saw the dark stains on the distant wall. June Simmonds clutched Chan's arm. Chan himself, deeply frightened for a moment, said:

"*God in heaven . . .*"

PERFECTLY ETCHED into the sandy-colored wall were the silhouettes of nine human figures, caught in unbearable postures of agony. It was as if nine human beings had been hurled against the

stone, their flesh and their atoms forced into the pores of the hard surface until their two-dimensional remains were left like shadowgraph pictures to testify to the horror of their deaths. Wallace ran his hand across the smooth surface where the nine figures were burned. Chan and June Simmonds peered at them. Chan breathed:

"What could have caused . . .?"

"There, *there!*" June shrieked softly, pointing. "Is . . . that?"

Chan whirled around. In a naturally formed alcove of the cavern's vast curving wall, resting on top of a carven dais of stone, sat a spherical metal object on a rectangular base of similar material. It was perforated with tiny openings and adorned with a few barbed spines. Obviously of human origin, but what the devil *was* it? Chan puzzled. He asked his companions. Neither seemed to hear. Wallace, almost fainted, wheezed: "It can't possibly . . . it can't possibly . . ."

"I'm sure of it, Will," June Simmonds echoed. "I saw a picture once."

"They were outlawed, long before . . ."

Disgusted, Chan strode forward. "Ah, hell, let's have a look at the thing."

June Simmonds' shrill scream cut him off: "*Don't, don't touch it!*"

"You stupid idiot!" Wallace cried, seizing Chan's arm. "Those things stay armed for centuries." Chan gaped in amazement. He had never seen two human beings gripped by such sheer, unreasoning terror.

June Simmonds whispered: "Chan, that is a constant conversion ray generator. Only a few were ever perfected, because they were so terrible. Supposedly all of them were found and dismantled—that alone takes two years because they're so dangerous—long before Sol was destroyed. They were weapons of infinite power, Chan. And . . ." She pointed, shuddering at the shadows. ". . . and the evidence seems to point to those nine. Whoever they were, they had this one last unit, and they tinkered with it, and made a mistake. They burned their tortured souls into the wall." Her eyes were bleak. "They destroyed a whole solar system in the process."

Chan felt a wild crawl of fear on his own spine. "You said . . . it was still armed."

"Of course," Wallace answered. "The emanation lasts three months, then stops. It can be activated again at any time, as long as there are humans left to work the controls." His voice was strained as he fought for sanity. "Don't you see, Chan? It makes this whole solar

system a timebomb. *That's* why it's illegal to return here. That must be the answer. The lawmakers know of this thing . . . perhaps a few dozen men in each generation, down through the years, living with the knowledge. Not daring to reveal it. There are people who would be foolish enough to try to get the machine, to work it . . ."

"*Quite correct.*" said a new voice. "*I, for instance.*"

Chan turned . . . and thought he was losing his mind. Approaching across the cavern's oozing floor, a massive heatgun in one fist, was what appeared to be the walking corpse of Dr. Amos Greentree. The corpse smiled.

"I was quite pleased that my little medical trick fooled you all so well. It took me a number of years to develop my psuedo-thrombosis alkaloid. Of course I had all the Elite Party funds at my disposal. The same funds which I offered to the Foundation, in return for the last bits of knowledge I needed to locate the conversion generator, my friends. I have worked seventeen years to locate it. I have it now. Thank you so much."

Chan, June Simmonds, Wilton Wallace, all stood still, still as the tortured shadows on the wall. Greentree-Brill advanced further, smiling.

"I promise to execute you pain-

lessly. Then I shall set to work modifying the generator, giving it a remote control which can be manipulated from Alphanus, and tripling its range, so that our system can be effectively encompassed by its rays. Then I shall return and my party will place itself before the people. With an unquestionable right to rule."

"The law ships . . ." Wallace choked.

Brill's dry little mouth quirked. "Followed by a gang of our black-leg suicide jets. Wiped out of the heavens, by now. Many people are expendable when the stakes are high enough."

CHAN KNEW what must be done. All his muscles tightening, he listened to Greentree-Brill's voice chuckle dryly on:

". . . realize, dear friends, that most technicians are unable to manipulate the generator without inducing the type of result depicted in those rather ghastly human murals on the wall. I, however, devoting myself for years to the pursuit of this tiny and peculiar looking machine have developed techniques for shortening its arming time, and doing so in perfect safe . . . *watch out!*"

"No, oh no!" Chan's hand, palm down, hung inches above the generator sphere. In a cat crouch, his

lips peeled away from his teeth, Chan grinned at the political agent. Brill's eyebrows shifted upward and a film of sweat popped out on his temples. Chan said softly, "I'm a thug, Mr. Brill, but the two doctors were very precise in their explanations. I also know a lot about heatguns. Before the beam of yours can melt me down, my hand'll drop, and while I won't get out alive, you won't either."

Chan hoped Wilton Wallace would be taking advantage of Brill's moment of pop-eyed terror. Hesitating, thinking what to say next, Chan heard Wallace move without seeing him do so . . .

Brill spun around, his legs getting a little tangled as he fired the heatgun. Wallace had heaved a rock which struck Brill's neck. Brill cried out. Wallace took the heatgun beam full on and his flesh began to smoke. In a spasm of hatred and frustration Chan burned Brill with his own heatgun, advancing the throttle cam to ash position. Brill began to scream with agony as the extra thermal units reduced him to a small heap of gray dust.

Uttering dry sobs, Chan knelt by Wallace's ruined body, then looked up at June Simmonds. "I never cried before. I want to now. I didn't mean for him to take it like that. I didn't think Brill would

shoot . . ."

Her voice was oddly soft, her eyes understanding. "I know, I know."

Chan arose, wiped his hands on his trousers, wishing he could erase the stench from his nostrils. He gazed at the sphere on the dais, and at the living shadows of the nine plotters fused forever into the stone. "What do we do now?" he asked thickly.

"That *thing* has to be disarmed," June Simmonds said. "If we can believe Brill, and its output can be tripled, it could eliminate Alphanus one day, too. That mustn't happen."

"That would mean," Chan said slowly, "going back, and turning ourselves over to the law, and trying to persuade the Technical Cabinet to believe our story, and send technicians out here to disarm the thing." A sour grin broke Chan's features. "Lady, it would take a lot to save me from reconditioning if I went back. A hell of a lot. How much pull can you muster? What about this foundation of yours?"

June Simmonds shook her head wearily. "Locked. Everyone arrested. They said it was coming, in the last message . . ."

"Then, baby, no dice. There's no third vote. Just you and me. And the balance of power." He hefted the heatgun significantly.

Dr. June Simmonds threw him a deep, penetrating stare. Then she shrugged as if she did not care.

"It's up to you, Chan. The law fleet was destroyed, but that doesn't mean they will stop hunting us. We might elude them for a year, or two. Or ten. Meanwhile the Elite Party will send out someone else to replace Brill. Someone else to tinker with that fiendish thing." She paused. "I expect too much of people, Chan. That's it, I guess. I expect too much of human nature." Her mouth curled. Her voice was flat. "Why should I give a damn?"

And retrieving Wallace's ther-

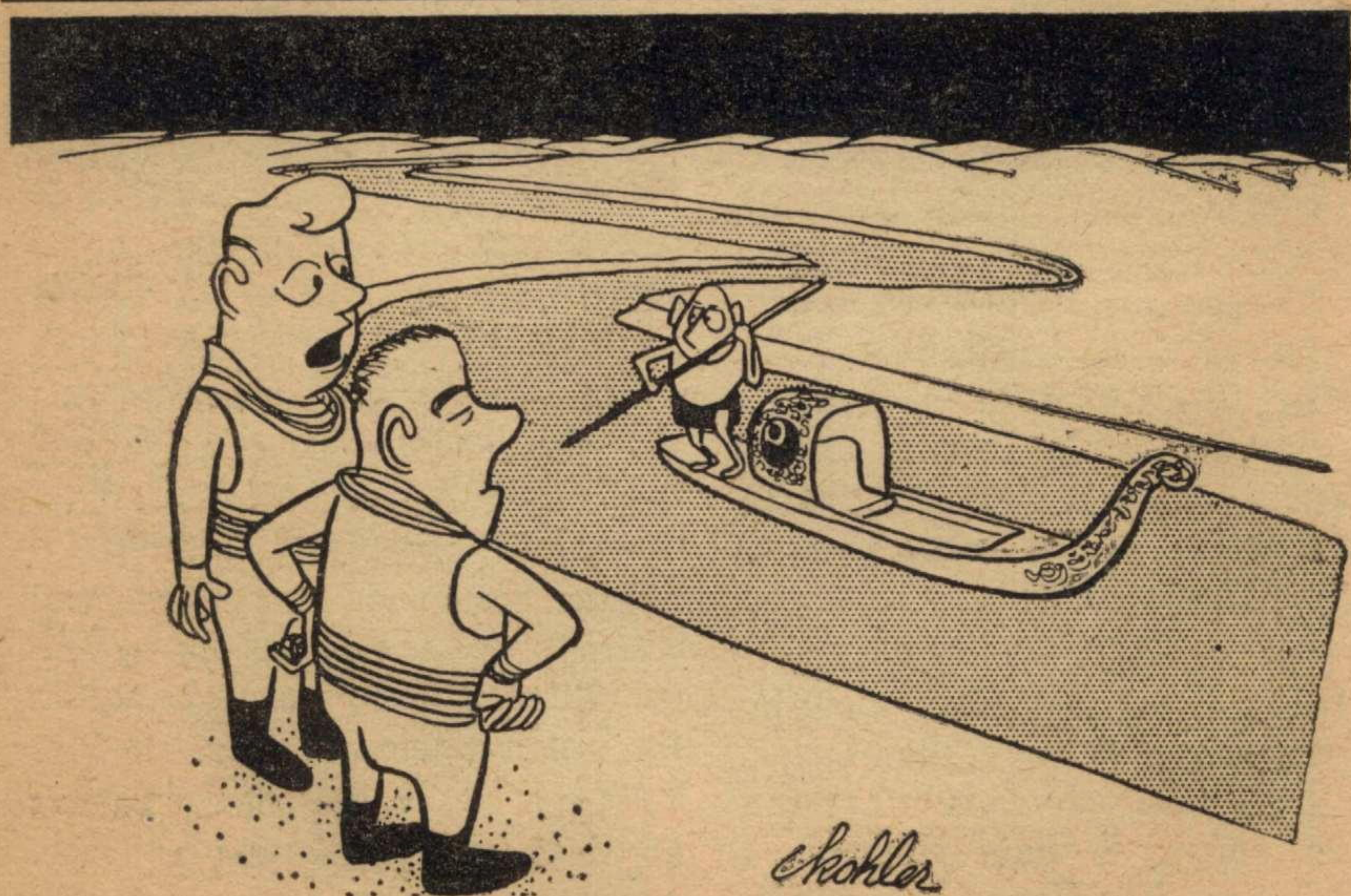
motorch, she started off up the tunnel. Thirty seconds later, Chan ran after her.

"All right," he said. "Let's go back. Let's take our chances."

She did not speak until they reached the tunnel's mouth, opening onto the night desert spreading out around Thor Peak. The twin moons rode high, shining whitely on the clouds of silica blown by the wind. Dr. June Simmonds said:

"Why, Chan?"

"I'll tell you when we're better acquainted. Just about the time I make you realize your father wasn't so smart in *every* respect. Come on."



"Remember all that controversy back home about Mars . . . and who would've thought . . ."